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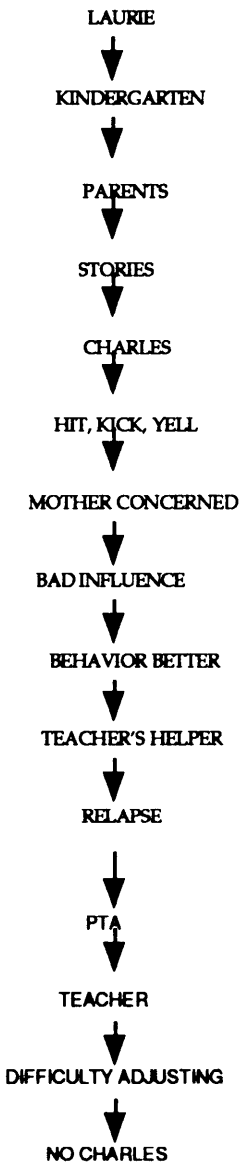
# Using Story Impressions To Improve Comprehension

Tanya Bligh

As a teacher of middle school remedial readers, I was always searching for strategies that would motivate my students to read — that would help my students improve their reading comprehension and be compatible with the view of reading as a process. The story impression method, developed by McGinley and Denner (1987), is one that I have found to be highly successful not only for remedial readers but for children of all ages as well as adults. I have used this method with elementary and middle school children, undergraduate students in reading and language arts methods classes, and with graduate students.

The story impression method is a pre-writing activity that develops a schema for ideas found in the story, and provides a starting point for revising and confirming ideas as the students read. Students use a list of clues taken from the story to write a prediction story (see Figure 1). These clues relate to the characters, setting and main events of the story and help students focus their schema on story — specific ideas. The story impressions strategy is grounded in research. Studies by McGinley and Denner (1985; 1987), Denner (1986; 1988), Denner and McGinley (1990), and Bligh (1990) have shown story impressions to be effective in improving reading comprehension. The method appears to work because readers formulate a written story hypothesis using their knowledge of

**Figure 1**  
*Story impression clues for "Charles"*  
*"Charles" by Shirley Jackson*



narrative structure and their schema for clues. Reading is defined by most experts as the construction of meaning using the text and the reader's prior knowledge or schema. Research has shown that schema development prior to reading is necessary to improve comprehension (Rumelhart, 1981; Langer, 1981; Pearson, 1985; Whitney, 1987; Afflerbach and Walker, 1990). Comprehension requires readers to be aware of what they know about the topic, to select the appropriate schema and to predict, confirm and revise to make the necessary connections between the printed page and the reader's prior knowledge. Afflerbach and Walker (1990) suggest that once a prediction is made several aspects of the reading process occur. First, it gives the reader a purpose for reading. Then the reader creates meaning and monitors comprehension by modifying or revising an hypothesis by checking it against the text.

The process of writing the pre-story appears to be an important influence on comprehension. Denner and McGinley (1990) found that writing a prediction story using the story impression clues was more effective in increasing comprehension than simply using the clues to list what might happen in the story. Writing the pre-story allows the students to create a rough draft of their reading (Tierney and Pearson, 1983) in the same way that writers plan and draft when writing. Students have to call forth their schema for narrative structure and their prior knowledge to create a hypothesis. The rough draft helps the reader actively engage in creating meaning when reading by verifying or revising predictions and assimilating information from the text into the existing schema structures. As one student commented about the strategy, "you got to imagine what was going to happen."

I have added a post-written retelling using the clues to the original method which I feel strengthens the reading and

writing connection and enhances comprehension. The retelling as a measure of comprehension growth is also more consistent with holistic practices than the multiple choice tests used in the McGinley and Denner (1985; 1987) studies. The written retelling with the aid of the story impression clues helps the students organize their thoughts and reinforces the reading process (Bligh, 1990). The control group wrote retellings without benefit of the story impression pre-stories and increased their comprehension over four stories as measured by the written retellings, although the means were not as high as those in the experimental group. Another aspect of the method that appears to affect comprehension is the modeling of the reading process. Students need to be shown how to use the clues and how to use the pre-story to monitor their reading of the story. I have found it effective to write a group story on the overhead or chart paper so that the pre-story can be referred to as I read the story aloud. I stop occasionally so that we can verify and revise our predictions. This appears to help students read the actual story and use the reading process. I have heard students express surprise and delight as their predictions were verified or denied.

Reading the title and clues with the students and discussing any words that may be unfamiliar facilitates the introduction of new vocabulary. Students should use the clues in the order listed to write a prediction story but can change the tense or form of the word to create a logical story. The prediction stories can be read orally to a peer, a teacher, or the class before reading the actual story. This reinforces a child's oral reading and can promote a discussion about why each child's story is different. The pre-stories are collected but not graded nor are they compared to the actual story or the retelling. They may be kept as a writing sample or returned to the student for inclusion in a writing notebook. Students then read the story silently and write a retelling using the

same story clues. With first or second grade, the teacher could read the story aloud and then have the children write, tape or dictate their retelling. The only difference is that listening comprehension is being measured rather than reading comprehension.

**Figure 2**  
***Pre-story and retelling for "Charles"***

***Pre-story written by a middle school student***

Laurie is a kindergartner and after school about bedtime her parents read stories to her. The next day a new kid came and he liked to hit, kick and yell. Laurie's mother was concerned that Charles would be a bad influence on her. The teacher's helper helped Charles to become better but after awhile Charles relapsed and the PTA decided to expel Charles and the teacher said that he had difficulty adjusting and he should be sent to a place where he would feel better and then he was gone.

***Retelling of "Charles" by same student***

Laurie left for kindergarten and when he came back he told his parents that there was a kid named Charles and said he was a bad kid. His mother was concerned about the bad influence that he might get from the bad kid. But after awhile he said that he wasn't in any trouble and that he was a teacher's helper. But he relapsed by telling a girl to say a bad word and then he said it. There was a PTA conference and when they went there and talked to Laurie's teacher, she said that Laurie had a difficult time adjusting. When they asked about Charles, she said that there was no Charles.

The retellings are used to measure comprehension of the actual story. Figure 2 shows a pre- and post-story by a male middle school student. These are then analyzed using a story-specific checklist or retelling protocol to determine the important ideas and inferences retold. Although some have questions measuring comprehension with only the written retelling, Bligh found that using a retelling and inference check produced the same results (1990). Scores on the retelling and inference check were consistent for the control

group and the experimental group. Research on retellings (Koskinen, Gambrell, Kapinus, and Heathington, 1988) have shown that retellings are reliable assessments of comprehension because the student has to generate and organize a retelling instead of passively looking up answers to questions. There are retelling checklists available that can be used (Morrow, 1988; Glazer, Searfoss and Gentile, 1988) or teachers can prepare a retelling checklist specific to the story. A percentage can be given for a retelling based on the number of ideas recalled. Percentages can be compared over time to assess growth in comprehension. Figure 3 shows how the retelling was scored using the checklist for "Charles."

**Figure 3**  
***Retelling checklist for "Charles"***

**Characters**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Laurie, the kindergartner who tells his parents stories about Charles
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Laurie's mother and father
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Charles — the bad boy who does all the bad things

**Setting**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. School and Laurie's home, fall

**Events**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Laurie starts kindergarten
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Problem — there is a boy named Charles who always misbehaves
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Charles continually misbehaves
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. (Provides 1 or more examples of misbehavior)
  - a. Charles hit teacher — spanked
  - b. Charles causes girl to bang head on seesaw — no recess
  - c. Charles threw chalk — no chalkboard
  - d. yelled — kept after school
  - e. kicked PE teacher — no exercises
  - f. yelled during story time — kept after school
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Mother concerned about Charles's bad influence on Laurie
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Charles's behavior improves
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Charles becomes the teacher's helper — passes out papers
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Charles has a relapse in behavior — he tells a girl to say a bad word
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Charles says bad word
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Charles gets his mouth washed out with soap
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Mother goes to PTA meeting
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Teacher tells mother that Laurie had difficulty adjusting at first
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Laurie's mother blames Charles's influence
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Teacher says there is no Charles in the kindergarten class
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Resolution — Laurie is really Charles

## Discussion and implications

Creating story impressions is easier than writing questions to test comprehension. Using the procedures (see Appendix) takes little time and supports what we know about the importance of using prediction and writing to develop and focus schema to improve reading comprehension instruction. The pre-stories and written retellings engage the students in self-generated writing.

Students enjoy using the story clues to write a pre-story. Middle school students surveyed after completing four story impression tasks said that they liked the method because "you get to write the story before you read it" and "you get to make up your own plot with someone else's words." Several students commented that it "helped them understand the stories better" and "it made reading the stories easier."

Story impressions are a motivating prewriting activity especially for reluctant writers. One student commented that what she liked best about the method was that she "got to make up the plot with someone else's words." Some students have trouble getting started on a story and benefit from having some clues to help them start thinking about a story. Some students put in much time and effort and write two or three page prediction stories which they eagerly share with their peers. Sometimes it is necessary to set a time limit for completing the pre-story. Students enjoy writing the pre-stories and many often revise and publish their stories. Since each student brings different experiences to the prediction task, most pre-stories bear little resemblance to the original. However, if they plan to publish their stories, the students should change the title and characters' names.

Writing the prediction story is also beneficial in motivating students to read the actual story. Students are eager to



read the story to see how their story is like or different from the real story. Students actually beg to read the story.

Story impressions are not only a powerful tool for helping remedial readers improve their comprehension but also are compatible with the way reading is viewed today — as a process. Story impressions engage students in reading and writing, developing predictions, activating and focusing schema and generating ideas rather than answering questions over literature. The story impressions method is also an effective way to model the reading process. The use of story impression clues can be beneficial in helping students organize written retellings and as a way to document comprehension growth. Story impressions clues could also be used only after reading or listening to a story to help younger children and those who are not used to retelling stories learn to retell oral and written stories. Using the clues appears to produce richer oral and written retellings of stories which in turn appears to help improve comprehension.

Preservice teachers and classroom teachers have used the method in their classes and practica and have also reported success with the method. They are surprised by the amount of writing students produce for the pre-story and have reported that poor readers are able to read more difficult stories independently and comprehend them. This could be attributed to the interest created by writing the pre-story or the capability of the method "to make the reading easier" as Clay suggests (1991).

There are other possible uses of story impression clues that warrant further research. Pre-stories can be used to assess children's knowledge of story structure and schema of different genres of literature. Pre-stories could be analyzed for developmental writing characteristics to help children improve

their writing. There may also be the potential to use the pre-stories to assess children's reading ability since reading and writing are reciprocal processes. Story impressions are a versatile and motivating way to improve comprehension and children's understanding of the reading process and for teachers to learn more about their students' reading and writing abilities.

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## APPENDIX

### *Procedures for using the story impression method*

1. Put the story impression clues on an overhead or posterboard. Include title and author of the story.
2. Read through the title and clues with the students, explaining any vocabulary or concepts that may be unfamiliar to the students. This helps the students to see how the clues connect to form a story.
3. Instruct students to use the clues, in order, to write a prediction of the story. Several clues may be combined in one sentence. This may be a paragraph or a story in which they embellish the clues.
4. Explain that everyone's story will be different from the original and from each other's because of their past experiences and prior knowledge.
5. Emphasize that the writing of the pre-story is an aid to comprehending the story and that it will not be graded. Creating a blueprint for the reading is more important than how close they come to the actual story.
6. For those students who have trouble writing, it is permissible to have them dictate a story to you or tape record it for transcription later.
7. Have the student read their pre-story to you, to a peer, in small groups, or to the class.
8. Collect the prestories when they have been shared.
9. Hand out the actual story and have students read it silently. The story can be read orally to younger students.
10. After the pre-story has been read, have the students return the story to you and then use the clues to write a retelling of the actual story.
11. The retellings are then analyzed to determine comprehension of the actual story.

### *Procedures for developing story impressions*

When developing story clues, the story should first be read and mapped for the important ideas. Words or phrases should be chosen to represent the

important ideas in the story including the characters' names, the setting, the initiating event, important plot events, and the solution and/or resolution. These clues should be kept short (one to four words) to allow the writer to call forth and focus prior knowledge while developing a hypothesis story that is based on the story clues and an individual's experiences and knowledge. Rumelhart (1981) found that one or two words is sufficient to bring forth prior knowledge to form an hypothesis. Since the purpose of the clues is to help children develop a prediction story that can be used as a blueprint as they read and not to predict the actual story, clues should be kept short.

*Guidelines for developing story impression clues*

1. Choose a story with a strong plot. This can be a picture book, short story, chapter from a novel, or an entire novel. Stories with surprise endings work well but aren't necessary.
2. Read through the entire story at least once.
3. Reread the story and map the story using a story map that includes the characters, setting, major plot events (initiating event, conflict, climax, resolution) and ending.
4. Choose words or phrases that designate characters, setting, and key elements of the plot.
5. Use a word or vocabulary directly from the story when possible or substitute a different word when it makes it easier to capture an entire idea or concept.
6. Use a maximum of three to four words per clue. (You don't want to provide too much information as this limits the interpretations of individuals.)
7. Limit the number of clues to ten to fifteen, or less for a short story (or chapter), and fifteen to twenty for an entire young adult novel.
8. Arrange the clues vertically, and use arrows or lines to indicate clue order. Include the title and author. Put on posterboard or an overhead.